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PLAYING TO LEARN

The Parent Child Package (PCP) program provides learning-readiness opportunities to Jordan's children and an invaluable opportunity for mothers.



Iman Ramadan confessed that she learned how to hold a baby by seeing it done on TV. "Life can be very demanding. Whatever tips we can get, we like." Soon after moving to Jordan from Egypt when she was 15, Iman married and started having children. Now a mother of four, this 24 year old has to delicately balance household chores, farming, and raising her children. Similar to her young children, Iman has learned by trial and error.

Although education is mandatory in Jordan starting in the first grade, kindergarten is not. In 2000, there were only a handful of public kindergartens in the country. Since then, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has put considerable resources into early childhood education and by 2012, there were 920 kindergartens operated by the MoE. As part of the government of Jordan's Education Reform for a Knowledge Economy (ERfKE), Ministry officials and development partners are improving access to and quality of essential early childhood education services. Since 2004, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been the biggest supporter of the MoE to achieve its ERfKE early childhood education goals.

The perception of the importance of early childhood education in Jordan is also changing. The early years in children's lives are critical to later academic achievement. Research has proven that exposing children to a variety of quality stimuli at a young age will have positive long term cognitive, emotional, and social effects. Jordanians have traditionally considered kindergarten to be an "extra" that is offered only by private schools; now they are pleasantly surprised that their government is opening free public kindergartens. Enrollment rates have skyrocketed in the last few years throughout the Kingdom. Mothers like Iman are trying to enroll their children early and waiting eagerly to find out if their children are admitted. Currently, the demand for kindergarten far exceeds the supply. Many children who try to enroll in kindergarten are turned away.

As a result, programs like the USAID Education Reform Support Program (ERSP) are experimenting with innovative ways to fill the gap. In addition to enhancing the physical learning environments of over 350 kindergartens and building the capacity of kindergarten teachers, ERSP engages parents to support the learning and school readiness of their children at home. For mothers like Iman whose children were not admitted to kindergarten, ERSP has developed the Parent Child Package (PCP) initiative. This program offers a high-quality educational experience with trained teachers for children who did not have the opportunity to attend kindergarten. Simultaneously, these children's mothers are trained on strategies they can use at home to promote their children's school readiness.

The logic behind PCP is that mothers are the primary teachers of their children. If kindergarten-aged children are not able to experience kindergarten first-hand, mothers need to provide this foundation. Conducted with USAID funds, a 2012 evaluation of the PCP intervention revealed that students were 5 percentage points more likely to score well on the Learning Readiness Assessment tool than children who did not receive the intervention. It also showed that the PCP program had significant effects on self-awareness and alertness to surroundings, verbal and communication skills, and physical development.

Although Iman's six year old son, Deyaa' was not among those selected for kindergarten, he was given the opportunity to have a kindergarten experience through the PCP program. Deyaa' was able to interact with trained teachers, meet other children, enjoy a renovated physical space, and play with educational toys and materials. During the ten sessions, children cover kindergarten curriculum topics such as letter identification and counting, as well



At the end of the program, kids “graduate” and go home with backpacks filled with books, learning activities, and a hygiene kit.

as classroom behaviors such as taking turns and sharing. The program also supplies each classroom with a box of locally-developed educational games and toys that promote learning readiness.

Each child receives a backpack to take home. Six year old Ahmed, another child enrolled in the PCP program, discovered that the backpack contained age-appropriate books, activities, and a hygiene kit. Ahmed was particularly excited about the hygiene kit. When children reach the first grade, they are expected to be able to handle themselves as grown kids. Ahmed’s mother Buthiana says, “Ahmed needs to learn how to walk to school, go to the bathroom on his own, and be responsible for his things.” Of the ten days of PCP lessons, Health and Hygiene and Avoiding Risks Inside and Outside the Home are two major topics.

While their children are learning through play with the guidance of a trained teacher, mothers learn about children’s developmental stages, how to communicate effectively, and how to use household items to create educational materials, among other things. As of June 2013, approximately 2,450 mothers from around the Kingdom have participated in the program. Buthiana admitted that she thought certain types of games at home were silly and served no educational purpose. After the training, Buthiana changed her outlook on games. “I learned how to make home-made play dough. When Ahmed does not know a letter, I help him create the letter with the play dough. And then we walk around the house taking turns pointing out different items that start with that letter. Not only is it educational for Ahmed, but it has brought the two of us closer together.”

For Iman, and other mothers who are not literate, the training built their confidence to help their children’s reading readiness. Despite her inability to read, Iman learned how to write letters using tracing paper provided by the project. Not only is she helping Deyaa’ learn to recognize certain letters, she is also teaching herself how to read. Using simple bartering games, Iman taught Deyaa’ counting principles with beans. She also writes numbers on



A class of PCP students interact with their teachers for the first time.

tiles in her kitchen to teach Deyaa’ to recognize what these numbers look like. Although Deyaa’ is Iman’s youngest child, she admits that this is the first time she felt the confidence to help any of her children with school work or learning readiness.

The training for mothers to support best practices at home has had positive effects on other family members. Many mothers reported feeling more confident in their abilities to parent, let alone improve specific results of their child’s growth. In focus group discussions after the training, mothers agreed overwhelmingly that the techniques they learned in the PCP training are helping them improve communication with all family members. Although storytelling has always been a traditional part of Jordanian childrearing, mothers were given tips on how to tell stories to achieve objectives in their children’s cognitive development. Iman notes that no matter the age of the child that sits in her lap, they are all learning and they are all having fun while doing so.

Jordanian women have a lot to manage in their households. Although the national fertility rate in Jordan is 3.4 children per family, this number increases in rural settings. The PCP training empowers them with strategies to more effectively manage their large households. For example, mothers learn the importance of setting a healthy routine for their families. “I always knew what to eat, but I was not consciously planning meals based on nutrients and a balanced variety,” Iman said. She also noted the importance of setting a bedtime routine so that her children get enough sleep. She admitted that these strategies are not only important for her child’s development, but they also made her job as a mom easier.

Improved communication techniques at home can help children explore their curiosity and feel validated while doing so. As Jordan moves forward in its education reform efforts, teachers and parents are learning to encourage inquiry and promote higher order cognitive skills. When asked how they

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mothers around the Kingdom have participated in the program as of June 2013.



Young girl in Tal Al Rumman School taking advantage of learning resources in the kindergarten.

previously communicated with their children, the mothers admitted to feeling bothered by their kids' need for attention. Some confessed to beating their children when the mothers lost their tempers. After the training, they realized the consequences of these practices. Mothers are now aware that using a calm tone of voice, welcoming questions, and using words the child understands are appropriate ways to communicate.

The training for mothers included a session on how to make puppets as a fun way for children to aspire to be something when they grow up. For boys, these types of games allowed them to focus their spirited energy on a positive and self-improving aspiration. For girls, making puppets may have been the first time they were encouraged to dream about achieving something beyond what was readily possible.

The PCP program was a chance for Jordanian mothers to dream big too. For some, the training was a rare opportunity to leave the house and interact with others in their community. Iman, who lives in a remote area, said she loved interacting with other mothers. "I would like more opportunities to do these kinds of things," she said. "We had the opportunity to listen to each other and be heard ourselves." At first, some husbands were not supportive of their wives traveling outside the home to participate in such a training. However, after a few days, the mothers began to explain to their husbands the benefit of the program for themselves and their children. Little by little, husbands could see the changes in the household. By the end of the training, most mothers reported that their husbands fully supported their participation and have even discussed being a unified front when making decisions about their children.

The evidence is unmistakable that kindergarten or a similar early educational experience is crucial for learning and school readiness. Despite the short duration of the intervention, the evaluation found a positive impact on children's learning readiness. However, the benefits of the training for mothers may be of greater note; mothers are the first, best teachers for every child, and have intrinsic motivation to invest their time and energy in their children's learning readiness. The mothers have become more educated and more capable to create a home environment that is conducive to learning. This will not only benefit the child enrolling in first grade, but all the children in the household. "We sit together at the dinner table as a family," says Iman. "I am in more control and I am happier. My happiness is certainly affecting all those around me."

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Mothers learn how to make educational resources at home, including white boards and puppets.



In the kindergarten environment, children learn social skills and make friendships with their peers, making learning more enjoyable.



Direct PCP training for mothers allowed them the opportunity to share best practices.